

Region IX  
California  
Arizona  
Utah  
Nevada

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RURAL HOUSING IN THE WEST

by  
THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION



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The Farm Security Administration is today the recognized pioneer in low-cost rural housing. Because of its experience and success in building rural houses quickly and cheaply, the agency recently was called upon to handle the nation's temporary defense housing problem. Yet Farm Security is not a housing agency. Its chief purpose is to put small, low-income farmers back on their feet through low-interest loans, accompanied by guidance in home and farm management.

Behind the story of how a rehabilitation agency turned to rural housing lies a significant fact. Not until FSA tackled the job of helping rehabilitate nearly 2,000,000 small farmers who were on relief in 1935, did the truth of rural slums strike the public. Urban slums had long been recognized, but slums of the open country were undramatic, scattered, not easily visualized. Their social cost was difficult to estimate. Few recognized their threat to community health and welfare.

The revelation of the farmers' plight also revealed the farm slums. In 1934 a government survey found that nearly 1,000,000 new farm homes were needed in America. It was found that the average farm house was in need of \$450 worth of repairs. Today three quarters of the farm houses in America are more than 30 years old. Eight of ten have no water piped into the house; nine of ten have no indoor toilets, and 15 per cent no toilet facilities whatever. Nearly half the nation's farm houses lack paint. A majority are unscreened. And a million migrant farm workers either lack housing entirely or have housing totally unfit for living.

For these reasons the FSA undertook the job of improving rural housing, both for farmers and for farm workers who already had been driven off the land. Particularly in California and Arizona, scores of thousands of homeless, migrant farm workers were living along ditchbanks and in shacks, in miserable unsanitary conditions. For these workers the FSA began to provide elementary, sanitary shelter.

The entire problem demanded not only housing, but low-cost housing. More than half the country's farm families have incomes of less than \$1000 a year; migrant farm workers average from \$250 to \$450 a year. Housing had to be cheap. And the first thing the FSA discovered was that little







attention had been paid in America to developing small, inexpensive, yet well-constructed farm houses. Similarly, it was quickly seen that the situation had opened a field for a modern rural architecture, for America had never developed the typical, indigenous farm houses of Europe. The American farm house was a patternless hodge-podge, improvised, ugly, built of cheap materials, too often following a city and not a rural design.

In five years the FSA has built or repaired 30,000 homes for farm families and has constructed nearly 200 planned communities for farmers and farm workers. It has won wide recognition for its success in housing. Yet Farm Security has done far more than to provide housing. Aiming not merely at shelter but at rehabilitation of small farmers and resettlement of dispossessed farm people, the FSA has built not houses but homes. And, more significantly, not merely homes but social communities.

### Housing for Farm Workers

In California and Arizona, Farm Security now supervises several cooperative farms, 17 communities, nine mobile camps and 16 groups of individual homes for farm workers. Each is a community in itself.

The communities for farm workers range in size from 200 to 300 family units, with recreation and community buildings, showers, toilets and laundry, assembly buildings, study hall, nursery school and shop for auto repairs. They have complete utility, water and sewage systems. Originally consisting of tent platforms, in later years simple prefabricated metal shelters have been used. Occupants pay an average of 25 cents a week into a community fund, but no rent is charged.

Adjoining many of these projects are the labor homes. There are more than 700 such homes, in groups of from 30 to 84 individual houses. The rental is \$8.20 a month, including utilities and a garden plot. The homes are for farm workers with year-round work, and are open to residents of the farm worker communities who have established roots in the community. The projects also provide facilities for community activities.

Some of the labor homes, built in multiple-unit apartment style, have attracted the attention of architects and engineers throughout the nation. These two-story buildings contain six apartments, and the simple construction cost of a single apartment is approximately \$1600.

Outstanding features of these homes are the extra bedroom space they provide through the use of a second story overhang, and the excellent ventilation from a continuous strip of windows around the second story walls. The four interior apartments have a living room, alcoved dining area, and a kitchen on the first floor, and two bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. The two end units have the same first floor plan, but on the second floor they have two bedrooms and a bath, and with the help of the overhang, a dormitory. The dormitory has folding doors which







convert it into two rooms if desired. Under the overhang of the dormitory at one end there are laundry facilities and a hot water heating unit which supplies all apartments. At the opposite end, the overhang provides a roofed playground for children.

Recently FSA was assigned the job of building similar apartments for Army and Civilian personnel at the basic air training school at Taft, California. Future use of the multi-family dwelling, however, will probably be limited to FSA communities, since it is believed the extra bedroom space does not compensate for the cramped feeling farm families get from apartment house living. Using the same amount of money, the FSA builds one-story, two-bedroom frame labor homes also having bathrooms and completely equipped kitchens.

### Planning for Community Living

Large-scale planning has been the Farm Security Administration's most significant contribution to low-cost rural housing in California and Arizona. The reason for the community type of housing is several-fold. In the first place, the problem of the farm worker in the farm factory areas of these states is that of the factory worker. His home is not part of the farm plant. He works for wages away from home. Hence the introduction of an urban housing pattern into the specialty crop regions of California and Arizona, where large-scale farming is predominant.

In the second place, Farm Security consistently endeavors to develop community life and growth among these dispossessed farm families who, accustomed to the individualized life of isolated farms, have become farm workers in a strange land. Grouping the workers, with community activity and recreation facilities, helps achieve this aim. Recently, the community center, school and clinic of new FSA communities have been designed to serve the entire surrounding countryside.

And finally, housing of farm workers in planned communities is a principal method of achieving low-cost rural housing. The major cost of rural housing lies in the costs of land, utilities, roads, sewage pipe, transmission lines, etc, and costs far less for these utilities -- per home -- when the homes are grouped together.

The FSA has thus been the only national agency which has had the problem -- and opportunity -- of developing large-scale community planning for rural areas. Its success lies in the fact that FSA planning carries through from site selection, design and construction to year-'round maintenance. The agency can thus plan far ahead, and look behind. Having had the chance to make and discover its own mistakes has itself contributed much to FSA's success.







### Economical Costs

Low costs have been achieved in the individual construction of homes, as well as by community planning. The labor homes, for instance, usually consist of living room, kitchen alcove, two bedrooms and a bath. They are built by private contractors, paying prevailing wages to labor, at a cost of around \$1350. Much of the economy results from intensive prefabrication and pre-cutting methods, which eliminate much material, cut down labor costs and permit the use of a larger proportion of unskilled labor. The materials are usually pre-cut by the contractor near the home site. A single truck can deliver an entire house to the site, where it can be quickly put together on pre-cast foundation pillars.

### Architecture

Economy has also dictated a contemporary architecture. Problems, many of them unique, are met in the most straight forward and economical way. Stylistic precedents are ignored. Cost bars ornamentation, but color is often used instead. The FSA has experimented widely in materials and architecture. Steel, rammed earth and even cotton have been used in some states. In Arizona the native adobe, tempering winter cold and summer heat, is used. At some communities shelters are built of a sheet material covered with asbestos cement, which furnishes a finished insulated wall material.

[Design and materials answer needs as they rise. Will paint cost too much? Oiled redwood is used. Will heels and hands soil the wall of the community auditorium during dances? Knotty pine is used for the lower half of the wall. Does the auditorium have to double as conference rooms? Sliding walls are introduced. Will the utility system be too expensive to reach single homes? The urban row house is adopted. Is the climate too hot in summer and too cold in winter? The homes are designed so that sunshine enters the windows in winter but not in summer. Are screened porches the custom in the area? Then screened flap walls which may be lifted up in summer are used.

### Cooperative Farm Housing

More elaborate than the labor homes are the houses on FSA cooperative farms. At Casa Grande, a large-scale mechanized cooperative farm in Arizona, residents live in individual houses of adobe brick construction with an outside stucco surface. Bright roofs with rock







wool insulation reflect the summer sun. The homes contain from one to three bedrooms and a screened porch, modern plumbing and electric installation. There is a community water system. Septic tanks dispose of sewage. Each home is furnished with an electric washing machine, refrigerator and gas range. There is a combination garage and store room. There are numerous community buildings, with fully equipped kitchens and sewing rooms, and numerous farm buildings. The homes cost from \$1600 to \$2000, and residents receive free rent in addition to wages in return for working for their own association, which manages the farm.

Chandler Farms, near Phoenix, Arizona, has 32 homes in four two-story adobe buildings. Adobe walls 12 to 18 inches thick resist heat and cold. There are upstairs sleeping rooms and an attached garage. The homes rent for \$9 a month.

### Tenant Purchase Houses

Farm Security builds most of its rural houses as part of its Tenant Purchase Program. Under this program the FSA makes loans to tenants, sharecroppers or farm laborer families -- members of the increasing tenant class which now includes 42 per cent of American farmers -- to enable them to purchase farms of their own. When necessary, funds for the construction of new farmhouses or the repair of existing buildings are included in these loans. It is found that new houses or extensive remodeling is required on about half of the farms. No Tenant Purchase loan is made unless the farm is considered capable of producing an income that will amortize the loan over a period of 40 years at 3 per cent.

New homes or remodeling of homes have been made possible to approximately 200 farmers under the Tenant Purchase Program in Region IX of the FSA. Farm Security offers farmers full cooperation in getting the kind of home they desire, and offers a number of types of homes, all fully modernized. The new homes cost approximately \$2200, while repairs may cost from \$100 to \$1000. FSA architects design both new houses and renovations with the aim of giving the family maximum use of the home. As with all good farm houses, the designs are adopted to rural living, which means a service porch, room for food preservation and storage, etc. All houses are built with bathroom. Yards are also carefully designed for maximum use.

### Rehabilitation Housing Program

FSA also carries on a form of rural housing activity under the rehabilitation Program of the Farm Security Administration. The FSA has loaned more than 16,000 farm families in the Region IX the funds they







needed to reorganize their farm operations on a more efficient basis. The agency supplements this rehabilitation work by improving the living quarters and health of the borrowers through the erection of sanitary privies, the protection of the families' water supply from contamination, the screening of doors and windows, and the eradication of disease-carrying insects and rodents. FSA grants often supply the materials needed.

At the end of 1940, approximately 500 families in 74 counties of the Region had benefited from this environmental sanitation program. The record shows that 350 sanitary privies were built, water supplies improved in 216 instances and 355 farm houses screened.

### Defense Housing

Although the FSA defense housing program is rural only in those instances where the agency has undertaken the resettlement of farm families forced to vacate to make way for defense projects, FSA defense housing is not unconnected with rural housing. It developed out of the agency's experience in housing farm laborers, and is helping develop techniques which may be of future aid in housing farmers.

Because of its experience in building rural housing quickly and cheaply, FSA was allotted the task of providing temporary housing for defense workers in crowded areas throughout the nation. Utilizing its experience in mobile and prefabricated housing, the FSA promptly began placing trailers and erecting demountable dormitories for defense workers. Trailer units housing several hundred families are being operated in San Diego, San Miguel and Benecia, California, and at San Diego demountable dormitories have been erected for nearly 1000 aircraft workers. Thirteen similar dormitories have been erected at Vallejo, site of the Mare Island Navy Yard. Completely salvageable, the dormitories -- built of Douglas fir plywood panels put together with screws and double-head nails -- can be taken apart after the defense emergency. If desirable, the panels can be reassembled to make ten or eight individual urban or farm houses. Two hundred demountable single houses are also being erected at Vallejo.

The Trailers, measuring approximately 8 by twenty feet, have built-in furniture, and folding doors convert the trailer into two bedrooms with accommodations for four persons. They have a stove, heating and water. A central utility building furnishes laundry, lavatories and showers. They rent for approximately \$8 a week. The dormitories are furnished and rent for approximately \$3.50 a person for a double room and \$5 for a single room. Each dormitory also has a lounge.







## Management

Farm Security combines standard housing management practices with efforts to help needy farm families help themselves. An FSA manager supervises both cooperative farms and the communities for farm workers, but from the start self-government has been encouraged. Cooperative farms are operated by directors of the association formed by the residents on the farm. In the communities for farm workers, democratically elected councils meet weekly, and not only make the local rules governing the conduct of the resident families, but also serve as judge and jury when the question of local discipline arises. The council also sponsors a varied program of community activities, education and recreation.

The defense housing projects are supervised by resident FSA managers. The dormitories are operated after the manner of a hotel, with the FSA furnishing linens, maid service, etc.

## Social Aims of FSA Housing

[ FSA tries in all phases of its housing program to make maximum use of materials and design to meet the local needs of community and family living. Architectural design, engineering and site planning are handled locally by the FSA regional office in San Francisco, and the construction work is done by private contractors. This gives FSA freedom to experiment, as well as to study solutions arrived at by FSA architects in other parts of the country. It accounts for the speed, inventiveness and ability to meet local problems which characterize FSA housing. ]

Yet the Farm Security Administration remains not a housing agency, but an agency to rehabilitate farm people. Its greatest achievement lies not in architecture, planning or economy, but in the social results of its program.

Throughout the West small farmers are enjoying the benefits of good housing obtained with FSA assistance. At the Tulare, California labor homes recently a neighboring farmer, impressed by the way a former migrant farm worker had kept up his labor home, offered the labor home resident a permanent job. In every community for farm workers in California and Arizona, children who once lived in shacktowns and drank from irrigation ditches now eat hot lunches and play in the recreation center. Once destitute migrants again go to community get-togethers with friends.

In such social and economic rehabilitation of farmers and farm workers lies the real value of FSA rural housing.



